Infantry In Action

Battle of the Bulge

EDITOR'S NOTE: Forty years ago, in mid-December 1944, the German Army on the Western Front in Europe launched a powerful offensive against the United States forces in the Ardennes. That offensive was designed to knife through the Allied armies and force a negotiated peace. The mettle of the American soldier was tested in the fires of adversity, and the quality of his response earned him the right to stand shoulder to shoulder with his forebears of Valley Forge, Fredericksburg, and the Marne.

This article was abstracted and edited from material taken from three official United States Army historical studies published by the Office of the Chief of Military History (OCMH): THE SUPREME COMMAND, by Forrest C. Pogue (1954); THE ARDENNES: BATTLE OF THE BULGE, by Hugh M. Cole (1965); and THE LAST OFFENSIVE, by Charles B. MacDonald (1973). These sources have been used with the permission of OCMH, Department of the Army.

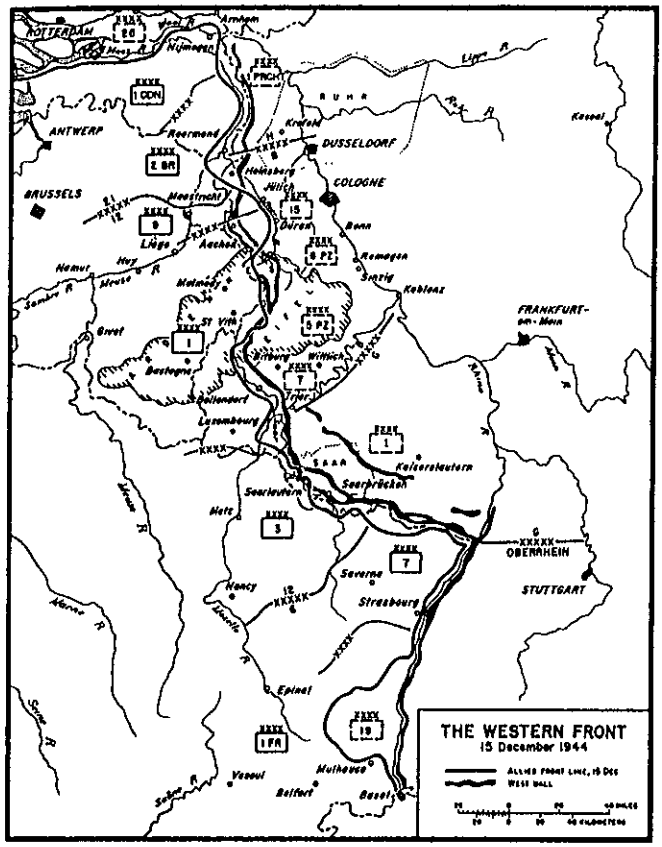
On 7 December 1944 the senior Allied commanders in the West — General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur W. Tedder, Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery, and Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley — met to lay plans for future operations. The Allied attacks in November had failed to achieve their main strategic goals: They had not decisively defeated the German armies west of the Rhine, nor had they crossed the river (see Map 1).

There was general agreement that the Allies should launch an all-out offensive on the Western Front early in 1945. After the meeting, General Eisenhower set plans in motion to continue putting pressure on the enemy and to chew up as many German divisions as possible before the main offensive in the north.

By this time, however, the German high command had decided to conduct a counteroffensive in mid-December in the Ardennes with the objective of destroying the Allied forces north of the line Antwerp-Brussels-Bastogne and thereby bringing about a decisive change in the over-all situation (see Map 2).

To hide their intentions, the Germans worked out elaborate deception plans. They made all their preparations under the guise of a counterattack in the north against the Allied drive toward the Rhine. Only a small number of high-ranking officers knew the details of the plan, and the plan stressed the defensive nature of the preparations. The two major attacking forces — the *Fifth Panzer* and *Sixth Panzer Armies* — were given fake names, and other units were shifted or renamed to confuse the Allies. The units of the *Sixth Panzer Army* were not brought into the line until the eve of the attack, and all their movements to the front were made at night. In addition, some of the units earmarked for the attack were left off situation maps even at the highest headquarters.

The main German effort by *Army Group B* was coordinated with those of *Army Group H* to the north, while *Army Groups G* and *Oberrhein,* to the south, were ordered to tie up Allied forces. The initial breakthrough was to be aided by Operation *GREIF* (or CONDOR), in which German officers and men, dressed in U.S. uniforms and driving U.S. vehicles, were to spread con-



Map 1.

fusion by issuing false orders and by seizing bridges and key points. They were to be aided by some 800 parachutists who were to be dropped in the Malmedy area. (EDITOR'S NOTE: Both of these operations were almost total failures. See Cole, pp. 269-271.)

The Germans hit Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges' First Army front in the early morning of 16 December. The smashing blow drove back five U.S. divisions in the Ardennes area. The surprise gained by the attack, along with the disruption of communications, rapidly created such widespread confusion along the front that the extent of the enemy action was not known for several hours at higher headquarters.

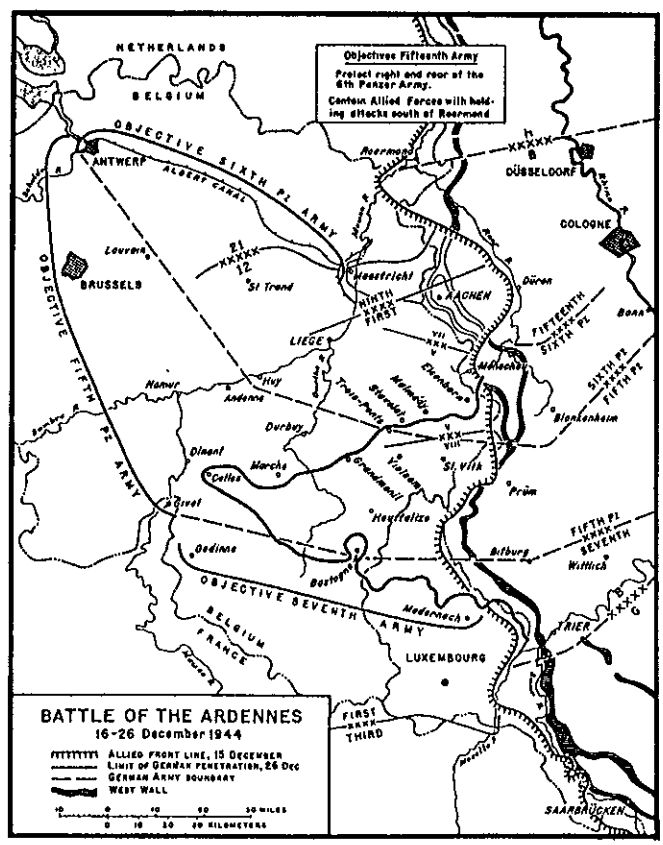
During the afternoon of 16 December, at Supreme Headquarters, Generals Eisenhower and Bradley conferred and then ordered reinforcements to the threatened area. More reinforcements were ordered to the area the next day.

Even as these first decisions were being made at Supreme Headquarters, First Army units were staging strong defensive actions that forced the Germans to withdraw in the *Fifteenth Army* sector and slowed the drives of the two panzer armies, thus completely upsetting the timetables of the enemy commanders.

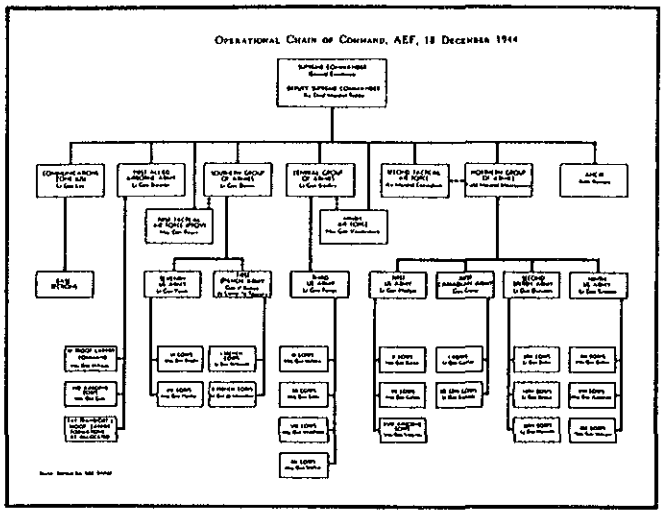
In the first two days of the German attack, the Allies still thought it might be nothing more than an effort to pull forces away from the offensives they were then planning. But by 19 December, General Eisenhower, apparently influenced by the growing evidence that the enemy was making an all-out attack toward the Meuse, placed immediate emphasis on checking that drive in the First Army area. At the same time, Lieutenant General George S. Patton, commander of the Third Army, was ordered to move north with six of his divisions and conduct a major attack against the south flank of the German penetration on 22 or 23 December. In brief, the general plan now called for plugging the holes in the Allied line in the north with U.S. and British units and for coordinating the attacks launched from south of the German penetration.

In the meantime, First Army soldiers in the bulge continued to fight desperately to halt the German drive or at least to check its speed. The enemy in this period moved ever closer to St. Vith and Bastogne, smashing some First Army units and isolating others. Even in the face of these powerful attacks, the U.S. forces managed to succeed in improvising effective counterattacks. U.S. armor delayed the enemy in the area of St. Vith until new positions could be established to the west. On the north flank of the breakthrough, First Army forces, in one of the most critical battles of the campaign, held the Elsenborn ridge, the village of Butgenbach south of the ridge, and the Malmedy-Stavelot line against repeated attacks by elements of the *Sixth Panzer Army,* thus buying the time the Allied forces needed.

But because the German columns continued to forge westward, General Eisenhower decided to put Field Marshal Montgomery in temporary command of all Allied forces north of the Ardennes (see accompanying chart). This change of command, though temporary, led to great



Map 2.



resentment on the part of many Americans. (See Pogue, pp. 378-380.)

The emphasis north of the Ardennes during the first week of the German offensive was necessarily on defensive measures. With his forces heavily hit and badly stretched, General Hodges could do little more than meet enemy attacks as they developed and hope that he could get a reserve to use later in an effective counterattack.

South of the Ardennes, however, Generals Bradley and Patton were moving rapidly to strike at the enemy penetration. By 21 December General Patton had broken off his battle in the Saar area and was attacking toward Bastogne. He had swung the bulk of his Third Army on a 90-degree angle and moved it north from 50 to 70 miles into the new attack. But his forces were met by enemy air attacks and by stubborn resistance that delayed the relief of Bastogne.

By now, though, conditions within the German armies were worsening. Their attack, whose success had been staked on surprise and speed, had now lost the effect of surprise and was falling more and more behind schedule as well. The *Sixth Panzer Army* had failed to break through the Monschau-Malmedy area. St. Vith had held out three times as long as the Germans had anticipated, and Bastogne, which had been expected to fall the second day of the offensive, stubbornly held out even after the Germans had surrounded it.

The German situation was destined to grow worse. The fog, which had interfered with air activity since the beginning of the attack, lifted on 23 December and the Allied air offensive was renewed. Allied planes immediately rushed supplies to beleaguered units such as those in Bastogne and opened powerful attacks against enemy armor columns and supply lines. A symbol of the changed situation for the Allies was the arrival on 26 December at Bastogne of advance elements of General Patton's tanks, which had broken through from the south.

On the same day, miles to the west near Dinant, First Army armor formations smashed the enemy's most ambitious bid to reach the Meuse. Other German drives were turned back near Celles. By the 28th, as a heavy snowfall slowed their armor, the Germans began the process of pulling back.

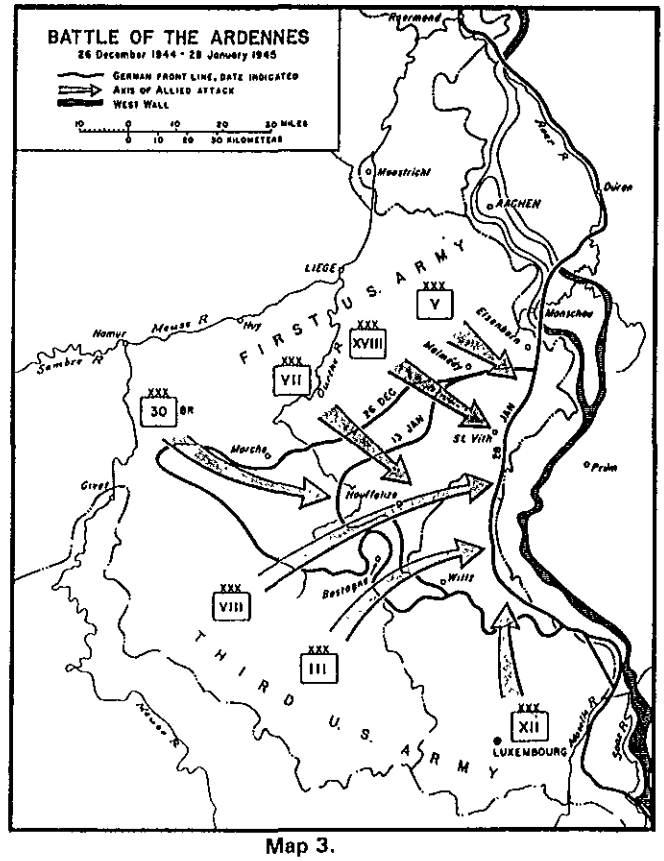
General Patton ordered his forces to push northward to Houffalize and to continue their march toward St. Vith. General Hodges at the same time ordered his units southward with the object of linking up with these Third Army forces. Although the enemy drive to the Meuse had been effectively stopped, the German forces still had to be driven back from Luxembourg and Belgium.

COUNTERATTACK

On 3 January 1945 the First Army began its attack to link up with the Third Army, to push in what had become known as "the Bulge," and to reach the Rhine River. The next day, the Third Army, which had been attacking in the Ardennes since 22 December, started a new phase of its campaign to push in the southern portion of the bulge (see Map 3).

The First Army's attack was spearheaded by the VII Corps, which had under its control two armored divisions, which led off; three infantry divisions (one behind each armored division and one in reserve); and 12 field artillery battalions in addition to the divisional artillery. Initially, the Germans offered only light resistance, but soon that resistance stiffened.

It was bitterly cold. The ground was frozen and covered with snow, and the roads were icy. A low, foglike overcast so restricted visibility that planned support from fighter-bombers could hardly be assured. In fact, it was



Map 3.

so foggy that not a single tactical plane could support the attack at any time during the day. Observation by artillery planes was possible for no more than an hour. It was a pattern that would not change much for the next two weeks.

Much of the time infantry and armor advanced through snow flurries, which were interspersed with light rain on the few occasions when the temperatures rose above freezing. During the late afternoon and evening of 7 January, a heavy snowfall added several inches to the cover already on the ground. Drifts piled in some places to a depth of three to four feet.

While the role of the infantry divisions was nominally a supporting one, it turned out to be more than that when the first shock of armor failed to produce a penetration. Before the fighting was over, both infantry divisions would incur casualties appreciably greater than those of either of the armor divisions.

By 8 January the Germans had begun to withdraw in the face of the attack by VII Corps and its neighbor, XVIII Airborne Corps. And on 16 January patrols from the First and Third Armies met in the vicinity of Houffalize.

The Third Army attack on 4 January had run head-on into a new German attempt to take Bastogne, although by nightfall on 5 January a virtual battle of attrition between the two forces had ended. Heavy fighting did persist in the area until 11 January, when the first signs of German withdrawal from the Bastogne area became apparent.

The meeting between the two armies at Houffalize on 16 January marked the completion of the first phase of the campaign to push in the bulge. And at midnight the next day the First Army reverted to General Bradley's control.

This meeting did not mark a break in the First Army's offensive to erase the bulge, but the XVIII Airborne Corps now took over the main assignment, a drive eastward on St. Vith. For the Third Army, though, the meeting at Houffalize did represent a distinct break in the offensive. General Patton, who wanted to get his units ready for an attack from the south directed almost due northward toward St. Vith, resumed his attack on 18 January.

Across the way, the German commanders finally received permission to withdraw from the bulge. And when the main XVIII Airborne Corps attack started, nowhere was there a solid German line. Although the German defense was a stubborn one that included small counterattacks, it centered primarily in villages and occasionally on key high ground. The Germans might slow the advance but neither they nor cruel winter weather with waist-high drifts of snow could stop it. (Sometimes the weather was more of a problem than the enemy.)

On 23 January 1944, St. Vith fell to the First Army, and in the south, by 26 January, all traces of the bulge were finally erased. Although the retiring Germans saved most of their arms and equipment, they had to destroy large numbers of tanks and artillery pieces for lack of spare parts and gasoline.

The drive from 3 through 28 January to flatten the bulge added 39,672 battle casualties to an American total of 41,315 that had been incurred during that phase of the fighting when the Germans were on the offensive. Estimates of German losses for all of the fighting in the Ardennes range from 81,834 to 103,900.

The greatest depth of the German penetration, achieved on the tenth day of the attack, was about 60 air miles. But by that time the average width of the salient had been reduced from 47 air miles to 30, and at its tip the salient measured no more than five miles on a front facing the Meuse.

This short account of the Battle of the Bulge only touches on the battle's highlights. But as a more detailed study would reveal, the Battle of the Bulge is really a story of the American fighting man and the manner in which he fought myriad small defensive battles until the torrent of the German attack had been slowed and dispersed, its force disrupted and finally spent. It is a story of squads, platoons, companies, and even conglomerate scratch units that fought with courage, with fortitude, with sheer obstinacy, often without information or communications or any knowledge of the whereabouts of their friends. In less than two weeks the enemy had been stopped and the Americans were preparing to resume the offensive.

Bastogne has become the symbol of this obstinate, gallant, and successful defense. The full story of the battle, however, emphasizes the crucial significance of the early American success in containing the attack. U.S. soldiers achieved that success by holding firm on the northern and southern shoulders of the penetration and by upsetting the enemy timetable at St. Vith and on a dozen lesser known but equally important battlefields.

One division historian said it perhaps better than anyone else:

None of those who were in it will ever forget the Ardennes. If we came through, by far the largest credit must go to the men who shouldered rifles and carried machineguns and mortars in the freezing weather, plunged through knee-deep and waist-high snow, dug foxholes in ground as hard as steel, stormed hill after hill in the face of perfect enemy observation, and cleared out woods as dark as night in the middle of the day. That is not the whole story but it is the best part of it.